

WEB SERVICE INTERFACES USED IN PROVIDING A BILLING SERVICE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to billing services and more particularly to billing services
5 that are provided as web services in distributed network environments.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Commercial service providers have made available to individual computing users a
plethora of computing applications designed to perform a wide variety of tasks, referred to
10 collectively as commercial services. In some instances, these commercial services may be made
available to users without charge. However, many commercial service providers charge users for
using their commercial services, or have a desire to do so. Commercial services made available
by commercial service providers that charge for their usage are referred to herein as “billable
services”.

15 Billing systems are designed to perform a variety of billing functions. These billing
systems are commonly used by commercial service providers to, for example, perform billing
functions that facilitate the charging of users for the use of billable services. Billing systems are
typically adapted to manage billing account information, charges, and billing account balances
relating to the use of a billable service. These billing systems are also typically adapted to
20 generate and present invoices (i.e. “bills”) to users of the billable service. Since the billing
functions of a billing system can themselves be made available for use (e.g. to commercial
service providers in the above scenario), these billing functions may be referred to collectively as
a “billing service”.

25 Different types of services may be classified as billing services. For example, a billing
account service and a rating service may each be considered as a billing service. A billing
account service will typically provide various billing functions related to the management of user
and billing account information, the calculation of billing account charges, the maintenance of
invoice information, and the generation and presentation of invoices to users of a billable service,

for example. On the other hand, a rating service will typically provide various other billing functions, including receiving incoming messages related to events that may be subject to billing, determining what billing rate should be charged for those events, calculating corresponding usage charges, and converting those events into chargeable billing events, for example. A billing rate defines the cost of a billable service (i.e. the commercial service being made available by a commercial service provider for which usage is charged) under a specific set of circumstances, and indicates how much a user should be charged per unit consumption of that billable service. The actual billing functions provided by different billing services can differ from service to service, and any given billing account service or rating service may not provide all of the respective billing functions specified above, which are provided only as examples.

The popularity of conducting transactions over the Internet has led to an increasing demand for businesses to integrate their computing systems, applications and services, with those of other businesses. These applications are often implemented using proprietary software written in differing programming languages. One known solution for integrating heterogeneous Internet-based applications or services introduced the concept of a “web service”. A web service is a well-defined, self-contained component that encapsulates specific functionality, and makes that functionality available to other computing applications over the Internet (or an Intranet or other network) by invocation (also referred to herein as a “web service invocation”) using a protocol. One example of a protocol that may be used in this context is the Simple Object Access Protocol (SOAP), which may be used by Internet-based application servers (also known as web servers), to provide web services. SOAP is a protocol that is often used in the exchange of information in decentralized, distributed network environments.

Recent developments in web services have imposed a greater need for software applications that are both modular and fit for use in distributed computing environments. Typical traditional billing systems, however, have not been designed in a manner that would allow them to be easily modified for providing web services.

Accordingly, there is a need for a means that would permit a billing service to be provided as a web service in distributed network environments.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to web service interfaces used to provide billing services in distributed network environments.

According to a first aspect of the invention, there is provided a web service interface
5 defined for a billing service, wherein a plurality of first billing functions is provided by the
billing service to computing applications residing on one or more computing devices in a
distributed network, and wherein: the web service interface is adapted for coupling to a billing
engine; the billing engine resides on a computing device in the distributed network and is
adapted to perform the plurality of first billing functions; the web service interface comprises a
10 plurality of application programming interfaces; each of the application programming interfaces
is associated with a first billing function; and each of the application programming interfaces can
be implemented such that the first billing function associated therewith is performed after a web
service invocation that commands performance of the first billing function is received by the web
service interface; whereby the web service interface is used to provide the billing service as a
15 web service that can be invoked by the computing applications in the distributed network.

According to another aspect of the invention, there is provided a software system for use
in designing a web service interface for a billing service, wherein a plurality of first billing
functions is provided by the billing service to computing applications residing on one or more
computing devices in a distributed network, the software system comprising: a web service
20 interface defined for a billing service, wherein the web service interface is adapted for
coupling to a billing engine, wherein the billing engine resides on a computing device in the
distributed network and is adapted to perform the plurality of first billing functions,
wherein the web service interface comprises a plurality of application programming interfaces,

wherein each of the application programming interfaces is associated with a first billing
25 function, wherein each of the application programming interfaces can be implemented such
that the first billing function associated therewith is performed after a web service invocation that
commands performance of the first billing function is received by the web service interface; and
a plurality of object classes, wherein each of the object classes defines objects for storing data
utilized by the billing engine and for communicating the data to the billing engine through at

least one implemented application programming interface of the web service interface; whereby the web service interface is used to provide the billing service as a web service that can be invoked by the computing applications in the distributed network.

Software components of the software system may be stored on computer-readable media.

5 The present invention is directed to a web service interface used to provide a billing service as a web service that can be invoked by computing applications (e.g. those that provide commercial services) in distributed network environments. The web service interface comprises a set of application programming interfaces, where each application programming interface is associated with a billing function provided by the billing service.

10 In an embodiment of the invention, the web service interface is defined using an object-oriented programming language. In an embodiment of the invention, there is also provided a set of object classes that define objects for storing data utilized by a billing engine and for communicating the data to the billing engine through at least one implemented application programming interface of the web service interface.

15 By providing billing services as web services, the billing services can themselves be hosted, and accordingly, commercial service providers can be charged for their use. The present invention may also facilitate the offering of different implementations of billing services as web services, which can be subsequently discovered by service requesters in a Universal Description, Discovery and Integration (UDDI) registry. This may promote the sharing of computing
20 resources within and among enterprises over the Internet.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

For a better understanding of the present invention, and to show more clearly how it may be carried into effect, reference will now be made, by way of example, to the accompanying
25 drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram illustrating a typical flow of messages between services in a distributed network and components of a billing system in an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 2 is a schematic diagram illustrating components of a billing system, which

includes web service interfaces designed in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a schematic diagram illustrating individual implementations of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating a common implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 5 is a schematic diagram illustrating an implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface coupled to a lightweight billing engine in another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 6 is a schematic diagram illustrating an implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface coupled to a common billing interface in another embodiment of the present invention; and

Figure 7 is a schematic diagram illustrating an implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface coupled to a common billing interface in another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention is directed to a web service interface used to provide billing services as web services that can be invoked by computing applications in distributed network environments.

In one embodiment of the invention, a web service interface is provided for each of two billing services: a billing account service and a rating service. The web service interfaces are defined using an object-oriented language, and different implementations of different billing systems can be designed by extending the web service interfaces.

Referring to Figure 1, a schematic diagram illustrating a typical flow of messages between services in a distributed network and components of a billing system in an embodiment of the present invention is shown generally as 10.

Billing system 10 provides different billing functions (referred to herein collectively as a

billing service) as a web service that can be invoked by computing applications [not shown], which provide commercial services made available by commercial service providers.

Accordingly, billing system 10 can be utilized by a commercial service provider to bill users for use of the commercial services that the commercial service provider makes available. As indicated earlier, commercial services made available by commercial service providers that charge for their usage can be referred to as billable services. The types of charges that may arise from usage of a billable service may include, for example:

- i. a one-time charge - a single one-time charge for use of the billable service;
- ii. a setup charge - a one-time charge for the first time the billable service is used;
- iii. a monthly recurring charge - at a rate based on monthly usage of the billable service;
- iv. an annually recurring charge - at a rate based on yearly usage of the billable service;
- v. fixed usage charge - a fixed charge when the billable service is used once;
- vi. variable usage charge - a variable charge based on the usage of a resource of the billable service; and
- vii. event charges - a charge generated upon the occurrence of a particular billing event.

While the billing functions of billing system 10 are provided as a web service in accordance with the present invention, some of the billable services may themselves be services that are being provided as web services. The computing applications that provide billable services reside on computing devices in a distributed network to which billing system 10 is coupled.

Billing system 10 may operate behind a firewall [not shown] for security reasons.

Billing system 10 makes available two billing services: a billing account service 20 and a rating service 22. Each provides a set of billing functions as a web service to commercial service providers. Billing account service 20 maintains user and billing account information associated with a billable service. Billing account service 20 also maintains invoice information (i.e. bill information), including invoice charges, invoice line details, and payment status. Furthermore, billing account service 20 generates and presents invoices to users. Billing account service 20 may receive billing requests for invoices through a workspace graphical user interface (GUI) 24,

and can communicate data to a payment service 26 for handling online payment of invoices, for example. Billing account service 20 may also be coupled to a subscription service 28, from which it may receive billing requests to create records associated with new users and billing accounts. User and billing account information is stored by billing account service 20 in a billing account service database 30.

In general, rating service 22 calculates charges to be applied to a user's billing account for the consumption of a specific, user-subscribed billable service made available by a commercial service provider. To facilitate these calculations, rating service 22 keeps track of subscription information. A subscription associates a billable service and a billing rate or package of billing rates with a user. A billing rate package defines the applicable charges under a specific set of circumstances (e.g. a billing rate of \$1/hour for using a billable service that provides users with access to the Internet in the morning, a billing rate of \$2/hour in the afternoon, and a billing rate of \$3/hour in the evening). The commercial service provider may also make available multiple billable services (e.g. an "offer"), with which a billing rate or package of billing rates is associated. When the user subscribes to a specific billable service, the user is permitted to use that billable service subject to the charges as defined by the relevant billing rate or billing rate package.

Rating service 22 is coupled to subscription service 28, from which it receives billing requests to generate subscriptions. Subscription information and user information may also be received by rating service 22 from billing account service 20. Billing requests received by rating service 22 may include requests to process billing events (i.e. events for which a user of a billable service may be charged) from a logging service 32, a metering service 34 (either directly, or indirectly through logging service 32 as shown in Figure 1), or from other applications 36 (either directly, possibly via application adapters where appropriate, or indirectly through logging service 32 as shown in Figure 1, for example). For example, a scheduler [not shown] may be used to extract metering events from metering service 34, and to convert the metering events into billing events to be communicated to rating service 22 for processing. After a billing request is received, rating service 22 calculates charges to be applied to a user's billing account, and communicates the information to billing account service 20. Rating service 22 can also

coordinate with an offer service 38 that is used to define available billable services and associated billing rates or billing rate packages.

Data utilized by rating service 22 is stored in a rating service database 40. In different configurations of billing system 10, the data in rating service database 40 and the data in billing account service database 30 may be stored in a common database, or may alternatively be distributed across multiple databases or storage means. Furthermore, in different configurations of billing system 10, the data in rating service database 40 and the data in billing account service database 30 may be stored in one or more databases residing on a computing device that is remotely located from the computing device(s) [not shown in Figure 1] on which billing account service 20 and/or rating service 22 reside.

Referring to Figure 2, a schematic diagram is shown illustrating components of billing system 10, which includes web service interfaces designed in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 2 illustrates the components used to implement billing account service 20 and rating service 22 (as shown in Figure 1) in greater detail. In accordance with this embodiment of the present invention, a billing account service web service interface 52 and a rating service web service interface 54 is provided, respectively. These web service interfaces 52, 54 are used to make the billing functions of billing account service 20 and rating service 22 available to computing applications as web services. Each of these web service interfaces 52, 54 are coupled to a different billing engine, as described in further detail below.

Billing account service web service interface 52 provides an interface to a billing account engine 58, which is a billing engine that has been programmed to perform at least a pre-defined set of billing functions that billing account service 20 is to provide. While billing account engine 58 may be a proprietary engine, in variant embodiments of the invention, it may also be a third party billing account engine. Billing account service web service interface 52 may be directly coupled to billing account engine 58, or indirectly coupled to billing account engine 58 through a billing account service adapter 60 that translates function calls between billing account service web service interface 52 and billing account engine 58, where required. As billing account service web service interface 52 makes billing functions available as a web service,

computing applications can command performance of these billing functions by communicating an appropriate web service invocation or call to billing account service web service interface 52.

Billing account service web service interface 52 comprises a number of application programming interfaces that must first be implemented before billing account service 20 is made accessible for use by other computing applications. Each of these application programming interfaces is associated with a specific billing function of billing account engine 58. Each application programming interface is to be implemented by a software developer so that the corresponding billing function can be performed after a web service invocation that commands performance of the billing function is received by the billing account service web service interface 52. Accordingly, billing account service web service interface 52 is designed for coupling to a specific billing account engine 58, by implementing the methods in the basic definition of the billing service web service interface 52 provided below. It will be understood by persons skilled in the art that the terms “software developer”, “software designer”, and “software programmer” may be used interchangeably, and that the actions derived from the terms “develop”, “design”, and “program” may also be used interchangeably in describing the present invention without departing from the scope of the present invention.

A basic definition of the billing account service web service interface 52 can be provided in a software system for use in designing a billing account service web service interface 52 for a specific billing account engine 58. One such basic definition of the billing account service web service interface 52 is as follows:

```
public interface BillingServiceInterface {  
  
    public boolean createInvoiceLine(BillingEvent billingEvent);  
    public String createAccount(BillingAccount billingAccount);  
    public boolean deleteAccount(String accountKey);  
    public String getAccountStatus(String accountKey);  
    public String getInvoice(String accountKey, Date startDate,  
                             Date endDate);  
    public boolean setAccountStatus(String accountKey, String status);  
  
}
```

Billing account service web service interface 52 includes the following application program interfaces (API):

1. public boolean createInvoiceLine(BillingEvent billingEvent);

 This API creates a record of a billing event in the relevant billing account.

2. public String createAccount(BillingAccount billingAccount);

 This API creates a record for a billing account and, if required, creates a record for a user in billing system 10. If the operation is successful, it returns the same billing account key back to the caller if the billing account key is provided in the call, or it returns a generated billing account key back to the caller if the billing system 10 is expected to generate a billing account key.

3. public boolean deleteAccount(String accountKey);

 This API deletes the relevant billing account.

4. public String getAccountStatus(String accountKey);

 This API gets and returns the status of the relevant billing account.

5. public String getInvoice(String accountKey, Date startDate, Date endDate);

 This API gets the invoice for a given billing account.

6. public boolean setAccountStatus(String accountKey, String status);

 This API sets the status of a billing account to the given value, and returns true if the operation is successful, and false if unsuccessful.

Billing service web service interface 52 is extendable (in an object-oriented programming sense) in order to provide additional billing functions that billing account engine 58 may be adapted to perform.

Similarly, rating service web service interface 54 provides an interface to a rating engine 62, which is a billing engine that has been programmed to perform at least a pre-defined set of billing functions that rating service 22 is to provide. While rating engine 62 may be a proprietary engine, in variant embodiments of the invention, it may also be a third party rating

engine. Rating service web service interface 54 may be directly coupled to rating engine 62, or indirectly coupled to rating engine 62 through a rating service adapter 64 that translates function calls between rating service web service interface 54 and rating engine 62, where required. As rating service web service interface 54 makes billing functions available as a web service,
5 computing applications can command performance of these billing functions by communicating an appropriate web service invocation or call to rating service web service interface 54.

Rating service web service interface 54 comprises a number of application programming interfaces that must first be implemented before rating service 22 is made accessible for use by other computing applications. Each of these application programming interfaces is associated
10 with a specific billing function of rating engine 62. Each application programming interface is to be implemented by a software developer so that the corresponding billing function can be performed after a web service invocation that commands performance of the billing function is received by the rating service web service interface 54. Accordingly, rating service web service interface 54 is designed for coupling to a specific rating engine 62, by implementing the methods
15 in the basic definition of the rating service web service interface 54 provided below.

A basic definition of the rating service web service interface 54 can be provided in a software system for use in designing a rating service web service interface 54 to a specific rating engine 62. One such basic definition of the rating service web service interface 54 is as follows:

```
20      public interface RatingServiceInterface {  
  
          public boolean registerService(BillableService[] billableServices);  
          public BillingRatePackage[] getAvailableRatePackages(  
              BillableService billableService);  
25      public BillableServiceInstance[] getSubscribedServiceInstances(  
              BillingAccount billingAccount);  
  
          public int processBillingEvent(BillingEvent[] billingEvents);  
          public boolean subscribe(BillingSubscription billingSubscription);  
30      public boolean unsubscribe(BillingSubscription billingSubscription);
```


6. public boolean unsubscribe(BillingSubscription billingSubscription);

This API unsubscribes the offer, billable services, or billable service instances for a billing account.

5 In an embodiment of the present invention, a set of object classes 66 is also provided in a software system for use in designing web service interfaces (e.g. billing account service web service interface 52, rating service web service interface 54). Object classes 66 define objects for storing data utilized by a billing engine (e.g. billing account engine 58, rating engine 62) and for communicating the data to the billing engine through at least one implemented application programming interface of the respective web service interface. In this embodiment of the invention, 10 billing account service web service interface 52 and rating service web service interface 54 use objects defined by the object classes 66 provided below, for communicating data to billing account engine 58 and rating engine 62 respectively.

15 For a billing account:

```
public interface BillingAccount extends java.io.Serializable {  
  
    public static final String STATUS_ACTIVE = "Active";  
    public static final String STATUS_INACTIVE = "Inactive";  
    public static final String STATUS_PENDING = "Pending";  
    public String getAccountName();  
    public String getUniqueUserIdentifier();  
    public String getParentAccountKey();  
    public String getAccountKey();  
    public String getPaymentInfoXML();  
  
}
```

30 A billing account is an entity that charges may be made against. Certain billing accounts may be invoiced and are associated with an organization entity or organization entity owner, while other billing accounts are associated with individual users. The billing accounts of an organization entity or an organization entity owner can be used to track the accumulated charges of all billing accounts associated with users that belong to the organization entity. In that scenario, a billing account would

be created for each user in an organization entity.

For a billing event:

```
5      public interface BillingEvent extends java.io.Serializable {  
  
          public String getEventName();  
          public String getAccountName();  
          public String getUniqueUserIdentifier();  
10         public String getAccountKey();  
          public String getRateType();  
          public String getResourceType();  
          public String getServiceName();  
          public Date getEventTime();  
15         public int getUsage();  
          public String[] getContractKeys();  
          public String[] getRatePackageKeys();  
          public String[] getServiceInstNames();  
  
20     }
```

A billing event is a record that can be used to calculate the usage of a billable service and the charges to be applied to the relevant billing account. Each billing event object encapsulates a billing event, and may contain the following attributes for the billing event: billing event name, billing
25 account name, user identifier, billing account key, billing rate type to be applied, resource type to be applied, billable service name, billing event time, usage of the billable service in terms of the resource type, contact keys, billing rate package keys, and billable service instance names, for example. An actual implementation of the billing event object interface may use some or all of these attributes, and may include additional attributes.

30

For a billing rate package:

```
      public interface BillingRatePackage extends java.io.Serializable {  
  
35         public String getRatePackageDescription();  
          public String getRatePackageKey();  
  
          }
```

A billing rate package represents a package of billing rates to be associated with a billable service during subscription or during offer creation. Each BillingRatePackage object encapsulates a billing rate package, which may include the following attributes: billing rate package key that can be used to identify a billing rate package, and billing rate package description, for example. An actual implementation of the billing rate package object interface may use some or all of these attributes, and may include additional attributes.

For a billable service:

```
public interface BillableService extends java.io.Serializable {  
    public String getServiceDescription();  
    public String getServiceName();  
    public String getServiceKey();  
}
```

A billable service is a commercial service that we have registered or recorded in billing system 10 that a service provider wishes to monitor the usage of and charge users for using that commercial service. A BillableService object encapsulates a billable service, which may include the following attributes: billable service key that can be used to uniquely identify the billable service, billable service name, and billable service description. An actual implementation of the billable service object interface may use some or all of these attributes, and may include additional attributes.

For a billing subscription:

```
public interface BillingSubscription extends java.io.Serializable {  
    public String[] getContractKeys();  
    public String getOfferKey();  
    public String[] getRatePackageKeys();  
    public String[] getServiceInstNames();  
    public String[] getServiceNames();  
    public String getAccountKey();  
}
```

A billing subscription represents a subscription, or an association of a billing account (or a user) with an offer that may include one or more billable services and associated billing rate

package(s). Billing rate packages can be used to calculate the charges to be applied to the billing account for usage of billable services. For example, a user can subscribe to an offer that consists of three billable services, including e-mail, internet access, and storage space, with each service associated with a different billing rate package. A BillingSubscription object encapsulates the subscription or the association. The BillingSubscription object may include the following attributes: billing account key that can be used to uniquely identify a billing account, names of billable services included in a subscription, billable service instance names, billing rate package keys, offer keys that can be used to uniquely identify an offer, and contract keys, for example. An actual implementation of the billing subscription object interface may use some or all of these attributes, and may include additional attributes.

For a billable service instance:

```
public interface BillableServiceInstance extends java.io.Serializable {  
  
    public String getServiceName();  
    public String getServiceKey();  
    public String getServiceInstanceName();  
  
}
```

A billable service instance represents an instance of a billable service created for a particular billing account during subscription. For example, if a user subscribed to use a certain computing application made available by a commercial service provider, an instance of that computing application is created and associated with the user, so that the user can run its own instance of the computing application instead of sharing the same instance with other users or subscribers. A BillingServiceInstance object encapsulates the billable service instance and may include the following attributes: billable service key that is used to uniquely identify a billable service, billable service name, and billable service instance name, for example. An actual implementation of the billable service instance object interface may use some or all of these attributes, and may include additional attributes.

Referring now to Figures 3 through 7, schematic diagrams illustrating alternative

implementations of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in different embodiments of the present invention are provided.

In an embodiment of the present invention, after billing account service web service interface 52 and rating service web service interface 54 have been implemented such that the billing functions of the underlying billing account engine 58 and rating engine 62 are made available as a billing account service 20 and a rating service 22 respectively, billing account service 20 and rating service 22 are deployed on a web server so that they may be offered as web services. Other computing applications 68 can then invoke the web services over a distributed network (e.g. the Internet).

Referring to Figure 3, a schematic diagram illustrating individual implementations of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in an embodiment of the present invention is provided. In this embodiment of the invention, two billing services are implemented: a billing account service 20 and a rating service 22. In this case, a billing account service web service interface 52 is coupled to a first billing engine, which is specifically a billing account engine 58. Optionally, in implementing billing account service 20, a billing account service adaptor 60 may be used where required, coupled to both billing account service web service interface 52 and billing account engine 58. Similarly, a rating service web service interface 54 is coupled to a separate, second billing engine, which is specifically a rating engine 62. Optionally, in implementing rating service 22, a rating service adaptor 64 may be used where required, coupled to both rating service web service interface 54 and rating engine 62. In this embodiment, both billing account service web service interface 52 and rating service web service interface 54 are implemented for coupling to individual billing engines to provide a billing service, as was also illustrated in Figure 2. Each individual billing engine 58, 62 may either be a proprietary engine or a third party billing engine. In some uses of billing account service 20 and rating service 22, a computing application 68 to which billing account service 20 is provided may itself provide a rating service, and a computing application 68 to which rating service 22 is provided may itself provide a billing account service.

Referring to Figure 4, a schematic diagram illustrating a common implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in another embodiment of the present invention is provided. In this embodiment, a billing service 70 is

implemented that provides both billing functions that would typically be provided by a billing account service, and also billing functions that would typically be provided by a rating service. In Figure 4, both a billing account service web service interface 52 and a rating service web service interface 54 are coupled to the same billing engine, which is specifically a billing account and rating engine 72. Optionally, in this implementation, a billing account and rating service adaptor 74 may be used where required, coupled to billing account service web service interface 52, rating service web service interface 54, and billing account and rating engine 72. In this embodiment of the invention, both billing account service web service interface 52 and rating service web service interface 54 are implemented for coupling to a common billing engine (e.g. billing account and rating engine 72) to provide a billing service, and the common billing engine may either be a proprietary engine or a third party billing engine.

Referring to Figure 5, a schematic diagram illustrating an implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in another embodiment of the present invention is provided. In this embodiment, a billing service 70 is implemented that provides both billing functions that would typically be provided by a billing account service, and also billing functions that would typically be provided by a rating service. In Figure 5, both a billing account service web service interface 52 and a rating service web service interface 54 are coupled to the same billing engine, which is specifically a lightweight billing engine 76. Optionally, in this implementation, an appropriate adaptor [not shown] may be used, where required. The embodiment of the invention shown in Figure 5 is similar to that shown in Figure 4, except that the common billing engine in Figure 5 is specifically a "lightweight billing engine". A lightweight billing engine is a simple billing engine that can perform a basic set of billing functions. The lightweight billing engine can itself, be implemented as a web service. The lightweight billing engine offers sufficient functionality for use in small to medium-sized service hosting platforms. The lightweight billing engine is designed for easy installation and configuration, and to be highly customizable.

Referring to Figures 6 and 7, a schematic diagram illustrating an implementation of a billing account service web service interface and a rating service web service interface in another embodiment of the present invention is provided in each Figure. In these embodiments, both a billing account service web service interface 52 and a rating service web service interface 54 are

coupled to a common billing interface 80, through which data is communicated to its underlying billing engine(s) and/or system(s). In Figure 6, the underlying billing engine is a billing account and rating engine 72 (e.g. as shown in Figure 4), and in Figure 7, the underlying billing engine is a lightweight billing engine 76 (e.g. as shown in Figure 5). The use of a common billing interface 80 may be advantageous in that a software designer would not need to change the implementation of a billing account service web service interface 52 and a rating service web service interface 54 when there is a change in an underlying billing engine or system, since all the relevant implementation details are encapsulated by the common billing interface 80.

In other words, the embodiments shown in Figures 6 and 7 employ the use of a common billing interface 80, such that a web services interface (e.g. 52, 54) need only be implemented in a generic way (i.e. not specific to any billing engine or system) in order to make the necessary calls to common billing interface 80. In contrast, the embodiments shown in Figures 3 to 5 require that a web service interface (e.g. 52, 54) be implemented with regard to the specific billing engine or system to which it is coupled (i.e. customized to that specific billing engine or system).

As indicated earlier, since the present invention allows a billing service to be provided as a web service, as a web service, the billing service may itself be hosted and provided as a billable service. Accordingly, in variant embodiments of the invention, a billing system may itself invoke one or more other billing services, which may include a billing account service, a rating service, or a billing account and rating service, for example.

In variant embodiments of the invention, the components in an implementation of one or more billing services provided as a web service may be distributed across multiple computing devices in a distributed network.

The present invention has been described with regard to specific embodiments. However, it will be obvious to persons skilled in the art that a number of variants and modifications can be made without departing from the scope of the invention defined in the claims appended hereto.